826 827 The mouth and tongue, ejectors of the word, can be compared in importance to the ear, a receptive organ. It is through the ear that man receives and remembers the word. Its role is comparable to that of the sex organs which eject life and receive it. The ear in itself has both sexes: male by its auricle, female by its orifice. This duality expresses the basic duality of man. That is why the corpse of [164] an uncircumcised man is sometimes amputated at the ear rather than at the foreskin.

826 301 Because of the symbolism of its shape and because of its function, the ear is adorned. Men formerly wore three copper rings on the right ear and four on the left, the number seven representing the complete being, male and female, ni and dya. Women wear four rings on each auricle or, if they can, twenty-two, which represent the twenty-two stages of creation, or the twenty-two generative categories. Sometimes, for both men and women, a single ring attached to the earlobe represents the mother of the other rings (1).

[178]

1. In olden times, men and women wore cowrie shells on their ears in the place of copper rings, a custom which would seem to be still respected in certain villages today. These shells played the same part as copper.

827 191 301 776 But the role of this adornment goes much further. As symbol of the word, it is through the ornaments that the spirit Téliko, master of sound, hears what /68/ is said to man. They attract sound and send it back to Téliko and Faro, who thus judge the acts and words of men. To wear earrings did not originally mean to adorn oneself, but to hear the spirits as well as to force them to hear what was said (2). Its second effect is to embarass the liar, the bearer of false news

2. Rings placed on musical instruments have the same purpose and also symbolize those worn by men. See p. 282.

or evil words, by putting him in the position of being understood by the invisible, therefore of being judged by them. A pleasant or well-intentioned word benefits the one to whom it is addressed and this

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3. Delafosse, Haut-Sénégal et Niger [Upper Senegal and Niger].

4. Labouret, Les Mandingues et leur langue [The Mandingo and Their Language].

etc., but these are still very fragmentary and incomplete. In addition, this society was completely disrupted by the French conquest, either by such radical measures as the suppression of slavery or by a natural evolution as a result of contact with European societies. Nevertheless, traditional structures retain their vitality, despite the effort to adapt them to European formulas.

The society seems to have oscillated between familial anarchy and the clan stage, according to alternating ranges of groupings, disassociation, and regroupings.

1. The Family

Concerning the Sudanese, Delafosse has already made the distinction between "the restricted family" and the "extended family." The restricted family is composed of the parents and children who live in the "hut." Taken alone, it does not represent a social unit. The true social cell is the extended family. This is the large united family made up of a group of restricted families whose heads recognize a common ancestor. This group, composed of agnates in principle, is the ba-denya, whose members live in huts within an enclosure: gwa or so. The two ends of this [51] enclosure rest on a blõ (vestibule) where the ancestors' altar is found.

According to Labouret, the Bambara distinguish three categories of family ties: the paternal line, the maternal line, and relationship by marriage. The child takes the dyamu (honorable name) of his father's group, but the terms applied to ancestors and descendants are the same as those of the maternal line.

"... Kinship includes the following generations: tolo-mina... tolo-sama... tolo-ma-sama: who seizes or pulls ears (a belief has it that if a great grandson pulls the ear of his great [825] grandfather, the latter becomes deaf);

304 grown up they are allowed complete freedom as to whether they undergo the operation or not. For fear of the pain and of letting a sigh or tears escape them and becoming the laughing stock of the whole village, many children of ten to fifteen years refuse (1).

1. Male children that are not tattooed usually have their ears pierced.

Bambara tattoos are simple and not at all ugly when well done. Although it disfigures some, leaving lumps as big as a thumb on their cheeks and chest, such an accident is /174/ extremely unusual, considering the number of those tattooed. They use no unclean substances to dry their wounds and make them swell, charcoal powder being the only medicine used in tattooing.

304 Although this practice is being lost around Ségou, and many
174 families no longer want it for their children, it is nevertheless not on the verge of disappearing entirely and completely. To remove a religious practice from an entire people takes years, centuries, and if a famous sorcerer came and ordered it for those who dispense with it, they would undergo it at once.

Chapter 9

Circumcision in Bambara Country

1. The Importance of Circumcision

881 The important act in the life of the Bambara man and woman
304 -- both sexes are mutilated -- is unquestionably circumcision. And whence did they get this custom? Some people settle the question with one word: "It is of Mohammedan origin." I refrain from being so categorical, for the Bambara have always rejected Islam, they have

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3. Even those who have known their husbands before this day are honored in this fashion, for the family will have kept this cloth faithfully, and if there is occasion to unfold it, they are very proud.

before all. In a word, everybody praises the bride for having been [81] able to remain a virgin, but they praise her in Bambara, which means they do so in coarse terms, and in order to emphasize her virtue they present her with a bouquet of roses rolled in filth.

When the bride leaves the court, her maids of honor come to fetch her, and while the men stay and get drunk and the women continue to clap their hands, to sing at the top /211/ of their lungs, and to dance to the sound of the drums, trumpets, and guitars, she herself goes into the hut of friends to end the first night of her wedding in sleep. She may not go out for eight days; she takes her meals in the hut and spends her days sitting on a mat with a white veil on her head, spinning cotton in the company of her maids of honor (1).

•[[78 574]

1. Many have freed themselves from this custom. Those who submit to it -- and they are in the majority -- can see their families again after these eight days of imprisonment and stay with them for two weeks. The bride's trip to her family at this time is called bina kounna sago. A few weeks later she again spends four days -- sou nani yé -- with her parents, and a little later she stays with them for one night, sou kélen si.

The groom stays in his hut for the whole day following the first night, and just about everybody, men and women, come to pay him